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ABSTRACT

The prominence of child abuse cases in child welfare agencies has focused attention on abusing parents who react to initial professional contact with hostility. To evaluate a structured treatment method for child abusing parents, two treatment methods were studied. A new method, which focused on the parent's handling of hostility, was compared to the usual child welfare agency services before and after nine months of treatment. Outcome was assessed in terms of the parent's ability to handle hostility and the child's behavioral adjustment. Results indicated that parents receiving the new treatment improved significantly more, but their children were not as well adjusted at post-treatment as the agency services group's children. The findings suggest that abused children need special attention in addition to whatever treatment is provided to their parents. (Author/JAC)

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An Evaluation of a Structured Approach to Treating Child Abuse

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An Evaluation of a Structured Approach to Treating Child Abuse

The prominence of child abuse in the agendas of child welfare agencies has refocussed attention on a group of clients with whom mental health and social agencies have long been familiar. Characterized as "hostile," "resistant," "hard to reach," and "unmotivated," their presence on our caseloads is typically not of their own volition. Within this large group of clients are parents who allegedly abuse their children, and who are brought to our attention through reports and complaints by others. When professional staff seek out these parents, they respond to initial contact with hostility that ranges from moderate to violent.

At Roxbury Children's Service in Boston, MA, we have been developing a method for working with these parents which has shown promise with an initial group of 18 families. This treatment method, called Content Therapy, was developed by Edward Stone, the second author. A text describing the method in detail is nearly completed. A brief summary of the method will be presented here.

The method is based broadly on a combination of modern psychodynamic (ego psychological) theory with certain tenets of social service and child welfare practice. The latter include an emphasis on the conscious experience and life context of the client, and a willingness to undertake direct intervention on behalf of the client including the provision of supportive services. The method is structured, and moves through three stages: The initial contact stage, in which the parent is engaged in the treatment process; the ongoing treatment stage, wherein new perspectives and behaviors are developed; and the termination stage. The unique aspect of this approach is its systematic focus on the issue of hostility in the parent's life. The approach involves an acknowledgement of the parent's anger or reality-based hostility while working

gradually to help the parent gain perspective on the over-reactive aspects of his/her hostility. Later in treatment, the parent moves to develop alternative patterns for expressing anger and handling hostility.

Method

Procedure

This study compared two alternative casework approaches prov ded over a nine month period to parents who have been accused of physically abusing their children. Parents in the experimental group (E) received content therapy provided by an M.S.W. social worker who was instructed in the method. Parents in the comparison (C) group received the usual agency casework services provided by an M.S.W. social worker who was naive about the method.

Subject

Cases were selected from among the referrals from the Massachusetts Department of Public Welfare according to the usual agency criteria used for acceptance into Roxbury Children's Service programs, with the exception that only parents who had been alleged to have physically abused their children were included in the sample. The definition of parents included primary caretakers such as relatives who served as guardians. In almost all of the cases the parent was the mother. Cases were assigned to workers on a rotating basis.

Background

In order to determine if the groups were comparable in all respects except method of treatment, data was collected on a host of parent, child, family and caseworker variables. For the parents, data was collected on: age, marital status, race education, and occupation. For the children, data was collected on: age, sex, school grade, presence of family problems, school/learning problems, physical/

medical problems and whether placement was intended at intake. For the family data was collected on: number of siblings and other family members, number of family members involved with Roxbury Children's Service and with other agencies. For the caseworkers data was collected on: prior protective service experience, and years of post-masters experience.

Group means on all of the background variables were compared using the appropriate statistical test. In those cases where groups were found to differ on a given background variable, and where the background variable in question was found to be significantly correlated with the outcome measures, the data analysis procedure (analysis of covariance) involved the inclusion of this background variable as a covariate.

Assessment of Outcome

The outcome of the two casework approaches was compared in terms of two variables: (1) the ability of parents to cope with their hostile feelings and impulses, as rated by caseworkers pre- and post-treatment using a 21 item parent rating scale developed for this study; (2) the behavioral adjustment of the index child, as rated by caseworkers, pre- and post-treatment, using the Child Behavior Characteristics Form (CBC), a measure which is widely used in child welfare research. In addition, the number and types of child placements utilized was recorded by workers as a process variable. For the first two variables the data was analyzed using analysis of covariance, with the post-treatment scores as the dependent variable, and the pre-treatment scores and significant background variables (see above) as covariates. This procedure "equates" the covariates, adjusting the dependent variable accordingly (through its correlation with the covariates), and thus allows one to see what the differences in the two groups would be if they differed only on the

independent variable (type of treatment). The third variable was analyzed using analysis of variance.

Results

The results are displayed in Table 1. The adjusted mean is the mean on the post-treatment score of a given measure after partialling-out the effects of both differences in the pretest scores and in the background variables where indicated. It can be seen that four comparisons were significant at P .05, and eight additional comparisons approached significance at P .15.

On the parent's scale, the parents in the E group at post-treatment had a significantly greater ability to handle their hostile impulses and feelings in a mature manner than did the parents in the C group.

On the scales of the CBC applicable to all children, however, the C group did better than the E group. A significant difference in this direction was found on one scale (VIA), differences approaching statistical significance were found in three additional scales (V, VII, XI), and on all of the other scales the differences between the two groups -- though not statistically significant nor approaching statistical significance -- favored group C over group E.

A similar pattern was found in the CBC scales applicable to the older children. A significant difference favoring group C over E was found on one scale (XII), differences approaching statistical significance were found on two additional scales (VI, X) and the differences on all of the other scales -- though not statistically significant nor approaching statistical significance -- favored group C over E.

Finally, in regard to placements, worker E placed significantly fewer children relative to the total number of children in the home. Worker E also tended to use fewer total placements, fewer after school placements and fewer day care placements. Both workers used foster care placements to about the same extent.

Discussion

In this study it was found that the parents in the E group improved substantially more than those in the C group in their ability to handle their hostility; however, their children appeared to be doing less well than those of the C parents. The meaning of these apparently contradictory findings is perhaps to be found in a consideration of the placement findings. Here it was noted that worker E placed significantly fewer children, and tended to use fewer total placements, fewer after school placements and fewer day care placements. Perhaps the improvement observed in the children in C's caseload is attributable to their involvement in a placement. This line of reasoning makes sense when one considers that children who have suffered abuse or neglect might need some form of special attention for themselves in addition to the treatment provided their abusing parents.

Table 1

Comparison of Caseworker Groups E and C on Outcome Measures

Outcome Measure[1]	Adjusted Means by Group		F (t for Placements)	P **=p < .05 *=p < .15
	E (N)	C (N)		
Parents Scale (+)	57.814 (N=11)	51.835 (N=7)	6.530	.022**
CBC All:	(N=11)	(N=7)		
IA (+)	22.772	23.306	.168	>.500
II (-)	11.519	10.806	.499	.492
V (+)	29.875	33.255	3.301	.090*
VIA (-)	9.616	7.955	7.050	.019**
VII (+)	27.691	31.322	4.059	.063*
VIII (-)	31.718	29.346	1.576	.229
XA (-)	10.525	9.981	.218	>.500
XI (+)	7.814	8.290	2.538	.134*
XV (+)	8.263	8.283	.003	>.500
CBC Old:	(N=6)	(N=4)		
I (+)	31.975	34.525	1.402	.276
III (+)	12.458	13.125	.550	.487
IV (-)	10.181	8.736	2.567	.154
VI (-)	38.463	33.203	3.934	.088*
IX (-)	10.203	9.713	.244	>.500
X (-)	30.406	25.011	3.796	.093*
XII (-)	11.189	9.144	31.384	.001**
XIII (-)	8.950	8.217	.579	.476
XIV (-)	4.462	4.288	.625	.456
XVI (+)	12.420	13.830	.886	.378
Placements:	(N=11)	(N=7)		
Day Care	.182	.571	-1.761	.098*
After School	0	.286	-1.978	.066*
Foster Care	.182	.143	.204	>.500
Total Placements	.364	1.000	-2.058	.057*
No. Kids Placed/ No. Kids at Home	.091	.440	3.138	.007**

1. Plus and Minus Signs listed next to Outcome Measures indicate whether improvement is measured by an increase or decrease on the scale, respectively.